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ABSTRACT

This article proposes steps for a systematic, logical method of moving from a nonexistent or limited reading program at the secondary or junior college level to a highly effective one which better meets the needs of the students. The first step suggested is to survey general reading ability within a school in order to formulate the direction the proposed lab should take--enrichment, developmental, corrective, or remedial. The second step involves determining philosophy and basic educational policy to be employed within the laboratory setting. Step 3 requires an initial analysis of skills needs followed by an on-going evaluation of progress based on daily performance, observable behavior, and development of positive attitudes. Step 4 involves determining which commercial and other instructional materials would best aid the instructor and the student in meeting specific goals. The fifth and final step is the monitoring of students' needs and materials to allow for proper allocation of funds for further staff development as well as for future selection of materials. (WR)

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A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A READING LAB

Increased concerns in recent years for teacher accountability and for numerous testing programs mandated for schools by state and federal agencies have made school districts more cognizant of the needs of students to have adequate mastery of reading skills. Combined with rapidly multiplying numbers of published materials and more sophisticated curricular demands, these concerns prompt many school administrators and faculties to propose special classes to aid in developing students' reading ability to meet content area needs. More and more federal and local moneys are being allocated to develop new reading programs, to extend elementary school basic programs, or to augment already existing special classes. Certified reading specialists are often the persons assigned the horrendous task of establishing a program to meet the growing demands of their schools or districts. Unless there is a well thought out procedure which takes into account such factors as population, goals and objectives, and needed instructional tools, the establishment of such a program within a meaningful learning laboratory is next to impossible.

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The intent of this article, therefore, is to propose steps for a systematic, logical method of moving from a non-existent or limited reading program at the secondary or junior college level to a highly effective one which meets the needs of all persons involved.

STEP ONE

Since the core of any reading program is the students for whom it is designed, the first step is to survey general reading ability within a given school in order to formulate the direction the proposed lab will take. Historically, programs developed to fit needs have been classified as the following:

> Enrichment -- a program of skills application for those students who have well developed reading abilities but who wish to move towards more sophisticated application of them;
>
> Developmental -- a program designed to provide sequential development of skills, habits, and attitudes to students who are learning to read and who require general reading improvement but who have no specific reading difficulties;
>
> Corrective -- a program of reading instruction for those students who have mild skills disabilities requiring minimal, short-term specialized instruction; and
>
> Remedial -- a program of intensive reading instruction designed for those students whose reading disabilities are numerous and severe, requiring long-term specialized instruction.

Students within any one school will cluster for placement within one or more of those programs. Recognition of the grouping patterns within a school will help to focus upon which of these programs need to be implemented or augmented in order to meet student needs. To determine grouping patterns, consideration must be given to

* Except where explicitly stated, any use of the term "skills" refers to word attack (phonic and structural analysis), comprehension, work-study, and rate.

-surveying general needs which can be done by polling teacher opinion, administration and interpretation of standardized group tests, following recommendations from clinical work-ups on individual students completed by local agencies, i.e. counseling centers, private psychologists, etc.

-sampling procedures which might be done by surveying all students, a grade level or content area, or selecting at random a sample of the school population.

-consulting existing data as provided by school wide standardized testing.

-differentiating between common reading development needs and the needs of linguistically and/or experientially different learners.

-perceiving the lab as accommodating students who have total communication skills needs, or those with only reading problems.

Consideration of these points would determine global needs of the student body to be served, and the general survey will have been accomplished.

STEP TWO

The second step involves determining philosophy and basic educational policy to be employed withing the laboratory setting. Effectiveness of instruction will be visible only if there is a high correlation between underlying educational ideals and pragmatic limitations. It is essential to establish comprehensive guidelines for determining the general parameters within which other specific components of the program can be arranged. First, the philosophical attitudes of administrators and faculty should be examined by determining:

-policy governing the students to be served , i.e. the largest number according to above delineated group; those with severest disabilities who will probably require intensive, long-term instruction and, potentially, great expenditures of time, effort, and highly qualified staff; or those students with greatest potential of rapid growth towards functional independence because they can be accommodated by short-term, small group instruction;

-whether or not students will come from certain content area classes;

-whether or not they will attend sessions on a part-time or regular basis;

-whether or not classes will be mandatory or voluntary;

-whether or not parents will be permitted to request admission of students to the lab;

-if the entire faculty has had an input into determining goals and objectives of the lab;

-if the administrative staff is willing to pledge support to the lab;

-if the total community has been involved, i.e. parent, local library staff, etc.;

-what considerations must be made for the demands of pressure groups; and

-if the goals of the program are both realistic and attainable.

Once these factors have been explored, the type of program that would be desirable can be seen. It is now necessary to balance these ideals against pragmatic limitations set by the particular situation involved. These limitations might include

-insufficient resources, facilities, and personnel to handle more than one of the programs deemed necessary of implementation,

-insufficient space allowed by physical plant for quiet study areas, small group work, instruction/teacher conferences, etc.,

-a staff that is insufficient in number and training to provide instruction in a one-to-one situation, small groups, or larger groups working in such enrichment skills areas as rate building, sophisticated critical reading, and more complex study skills,

-the need to hire additional qualified staff in order to meet the determined goals,

-the need to provide in-service training for para-professional and other staff members who may be appointed to assist in the lab, and

-the possibility of having sufficient resources to continue the program until primary goals have been met.

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After a determination has been made about student population to be served and the feasibility of doing so, it is necessary to outline procedures to determine specific needs of each student enrolled in the lab program.

STEP THREE

No instructional plan is effective unless it is based upon a sound diagnostic profile of individual strengths and limitations. Valuable time may be wasted in presenting skills already mastered by the student while neglecting to focus instruction on true weaknesses. It is a misconception to assume that because students may be classified as enrichment/developmental/corrective/remedial that members of a group are similar in skills needs and may be lock-stepped into similar instructional programs. Two individuals with the same basic skill weakness may not be deficient to the same degree; therefore, they will require totally different methods, materials, and learning experiences. For this reason, the results of standardized group instruments are inadequate for determining specific laboratory procedure and instructional plan. There is one significant consideration to be made:

-the means by which individual needs will be determined, eg. teacher/reading specialist/ clinical referrals; standardized and/or informal evaluations; group and/or individual surveys; or student self-checklist of reading competencies.

This initial analysis of skills needs must then be followed by an on-going evaluation of progress based on daily performance, observable behavior, and development of positive attitudes. Change in the program direction will occur as progress is made in accomplishing the original objectives established for each student. Growth, however, will be measurable only if there exists an adequate match between procedure and materials used and clearly identified student objectives.

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STEP FOUR

Perhaps the most difficult step is determining which commercial and/or other materials will best aid the instructor and the student to meet specific goals. A systematized inventory of materials and facilities already available in the school would provide a logical approach to this matching. This is best accomplished by charting information as follows:

(1) Down the left hand side of the chart, list all available materials and equipment under headings such as:

SOFTWARE- books
programmed texts
kits/labs
games/puzzles
resources

HARDWARE- machines

EVALUATIVE INSTRUMENTS- group
individual

(2) Across the top of the chart, list all the subskills you deem significant for your school population under headings such as:

WORD RECOGNITION- eg. sight words
WORD ATTACK
VOCABULARY
COMPREHENSION
STUDY SKILLS
RECREATIONAL
MOTIVATIONAL

(3) Determine the particular skills which will be reinforced by use of each item listed vertically; and

(4) Place a checkmark next to each item under the determined skills.

If an examination of your chart reveals an adequate number of materials for instruction in word recognition and basic comprehension skills, but an inadequate number for such areas as critical reading, listening, and study skills, it might be necessary to utilize moneys to supply these areas first.

It probably would be of assistance in making use of the chart to determine

-the materials already existing in the library, classrooms, and storerooms that could be transferred to the reading lab:

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i.e. tape recorder and tapes, filmstrip projectors, language masters, sets of high interest/low vocabulary books and other such materials,

-the existing non-instructional items that could be adapted for instructional use: i.e. library books, newspapers, teacher-made materials,

-the amount of overlapping with classroom programs of such items as Tactics in Reading (Scott-Foresman) and SRA kits,

-the quantity of materials for skills application without too heavy reliance upon activity books, and

-the balance between hardward and software.

Once both needs of the student body to be served and quantity/quality of instructional aids available have been assessed, determination may be made that a school is already sufficiently equipped to initiate the lab program without expenditure of special moneys.

STEP FIVE

If the checkmarks form definite clusters leaving large blank areas on the chart, it is readily apparent where proposed special funds may be utilized. However, there should be a high correlation between budget expenditures and needs and objectives. For example, if a student population has need of basic comprehension skills, the purchase of additional pacers for a lab will do little to correct this deficiency. Likewise, purchasing a large number of phonic workbooks for a population already able to apply basic word attack skills is obviously wasteful. In both instances, not only would student needs not be met, but such purchases would be a gross misallocation of funds.

To guide in the selection of materials judged essential to provide a variety of learning experiences to meet specific needs, a check should be made for

-the number of items to determine if there are sufficient quantities to serve the needs of all students in the program,

-an adequate variety of materials according to skill development need and learning differences according to modality,

-the number of recreational materials at all reading levels,

-adequate space available to accommodate the hardward and software to be purchased (work area and storage),

-a low enough student-teacher ratio according to original categories of students selected,

-staff preparedness to accomplish assigned tasks, i.e. content area teachers, if they are to be involved as part of the program, aides, and/or volunteers, and

-needed in-service training.

It is important to remember that many materials listed are consumable by nature and intent and must be replaced periodically. Likewise, publishing houses are constantly in the process of developing increasingly relevant and more attractive materials. Furthermore, as student needs are met, it will probably become obvious that more software and hardware will be needed in a specific skill area than was originally apparent. In order to keep the lab truly functional and current, staff charged with responsibility for the initial program would be well advised to hold back adequate moneys to meet changing needs.

Once these five major steps have been taken, it can readily be seen that the establishment of a reading laboratory is not something to be left to chance hoping that all aspects will be covered. Rather, when one considers that all too frequently disservice to society is perpetrated in the name of curriculum change and innovation, it should be obvious that real service can be provided only by persons who have given grave thought to (1) global needs of student bodies; (2) educational philosophies and policies; (3) needs of specific students; (4) items truly needed for instructional use, and (5) proper allocation of funds for further staff development as well as for materials.